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mask of glass, or, Little Roxy in a double role

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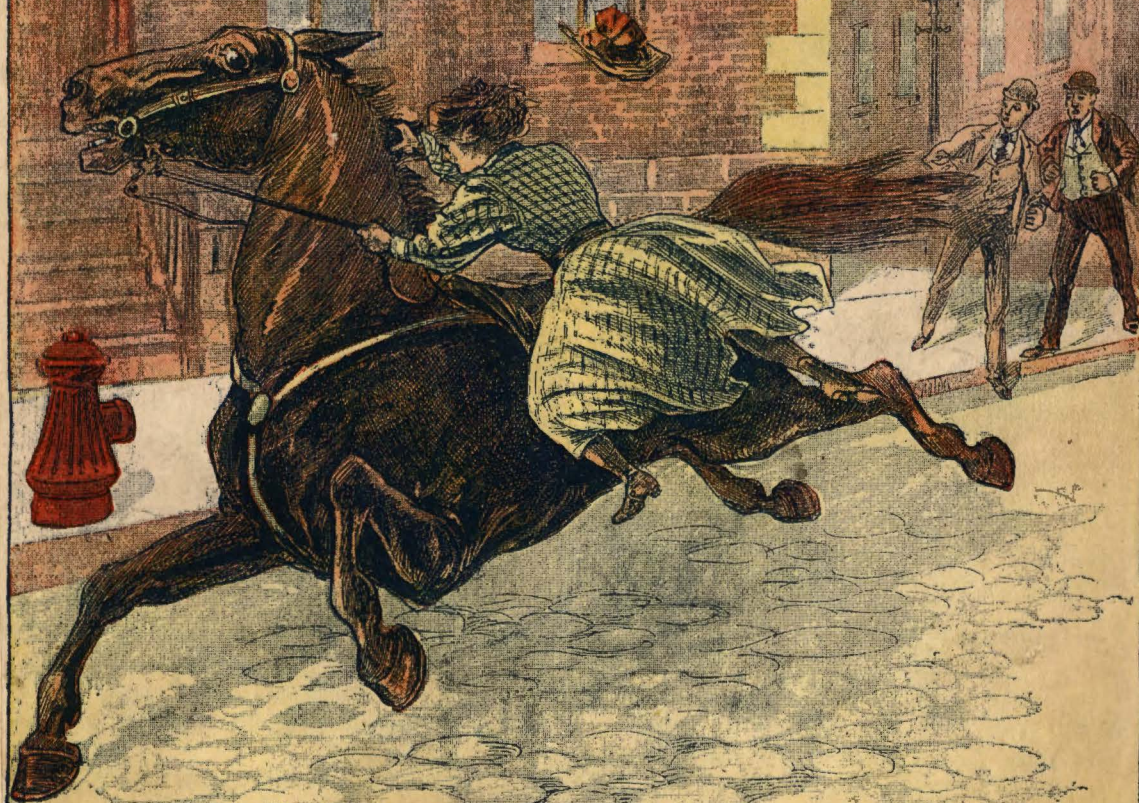
No. 68.

NEW YORK, April 16, 1898.

Price 5 Cents.

THE MASK OF GLASS.

OR, LITTLE ROXY IN A DOUBLE ROLE



By the Author of
'Nick Carter'

"AS THE HORSE CAME TEARING BY, ROXY'S DAINTY FORM CLEAVED THE AIR LIKE THAT OF AN ACROBAT AND SHE STRUCK THE SADDLE TRUE AND FIRM."

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THE MASK OF GLASS

OR,

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE RUNAWAY HORSE.

"Look out!"

"Whoa!"

"Stop that horse!"

"Stop a whirlwind!"

With a clattering slide a riderless, coal black horse came to its knees, rebounded to its haunches, turned, leaped and sped back the way it had come like a streak of lightning.

It was early morning, but both ends of the narrow short New York street were blocked by curious and excited humanity.

At one end was a pursuing crowd—from it the mettled animal had just fled.

At the other it met four wondering, interested and then interrupting persons—three boys and a girl.

The former were Bob Ferret, Jack Burton and Buff Hutchinson—Nick Carter's young expert professionals.

Their companion was that queen of little women detectives—Roxy, the flower girl.

The sight of a foaming, blood-flecked animal, fire in its eye, terror and tragedy suggested in its frenzied snorts and leaps, would have checked and startled these

keen, ever-observant students of life as it goes in a great city at any time.

A word from Roxy, however—as the horse, blockaded, turned frantically like an animal fairly trapped—emphasized the situation, and her three companions glided to her side with additional sensational zest as if she were a seeress.

"Bob!"

"Well, Roxy?"

"The horse!"

"Nonsense!"

"Roxy!" cried sturdy Jack, his eyes snapping, "you don't mean——"

"The horse, I say. We're looking for a man?"

"Yes."

"I saw him at midnight——"

"And mounted, you claim."

"He got away—we've been searching since, haven't we?"

"With no result."

"Until now—we've lost him, but that is the horse I saw him ride."

"You are sure?" spoke Bob hurriedly.

"Very. The bridle rosettes, the carved saddle, the animal itself—I remember all distinctly," asserted the girl detective with positiveness.

"Then——" began Buff.

"The animal must be stopped—it's

home located," spoke Bob Ferret in that intense tone of his that always meant business.

If the attention of the little group had been attracted because of a stirring scene before, now fervid intelligence, vivid expectancy illumined each face.

In a flash every mind reviewed the case that had brought them disappointed and dispirited to the end of this street two minutes previous.

In a twinkling the realization that the horse was a tangible clue to what they were after, electrified dormant energy like magic.

Simply told, these apt pupils of Nick Carter's detective school were looking for a man, name unknown, who had stolen a young girl from a female seminary in New Haven.

His description alone had been given in a telegram to Nick Carter, imploring him to watch incoming trains and steamers, and apprehend a person whom the anxious preceptress was certain had deceived her, in alleging that he had been sent after the missing pupil, Elsie Deane, by her father.

The quartette had certainly located the man in a lodging house half a mile from the spot, where they now were, about midnight.

He had slipped them, however. An hour later Roxy had seen him, mounted, tear away in a trail of dust.

Since then it had been a tireless, unprofitable search—until now.

Instantly every member of the coterie moved into prompt, independent action, as if, having something to do, each knew just how to do it.

Jack Burton picked up a board lying at the curb and blocked one sidewalk—Buff took the other side of the street, arms outspread.

Bob stood in mid-street—his pose suggesting readiness for a dive, a grab at the trailing bridle when the horse next neared him.

Roxy was thinking.

She was a rosy, animated picture amid the rosy hues of early dawn.

Her eyes never left the speeding horse—she seemed calculating, guessing, nerv-ing herself, as if for one of those brilliant,

plucky "breaks," as Bob called them, that had made her record in the past.

Perhaps the splendid strength and alertness of the mettled horse revived a thrilling memory of her circus practice, when an avaricious uncle had tried to make her "the infant bareback rider phenomenon."

More probably, however, nettled at missing a man they had closely shadowed, her professional "spunk" was aroused, and she determined to capture this one clue in sight—the riderless horse—at all hazards.

"Head him off—I'll do the rest!" ordered Bob staunchly.

"You won't!" said Roxy.

"Eh?"

She had edged up to his side, and she gave him a peculiarly meaning glance.

"Look!" she said, pointing. "The horse has turned."

"Great goodness!"

Bob thrilled.

The horse had been met by the on-crowding pursuers at the far end of the street.

It could not break through that human wall, and it turned when two men sprang before it.

One was swept flat with a fearful crash, and lay white and still.

The other had caught the bridle rein. A jerk took him off his feet, a swing snapped the rein, and he fell with a groan, a flying hoof tearing his scalp from end to end.

"The horse is frantic, wild, crazed," spoke Roxy hurriedly. "Don't risk folly, Bob!"

"What do you call folly?" demanded Bob, bridling a trifle.

"Trying to stop that cyclone of fury by ordinary methods."

"Do you know any better ones?"

"I do."

"What?"

"Watch me, and see!"

"Look here——"

"Get aside—do you want to be crushed? Boys, don't stop that horse—tracing it home, is finding out where our man started from."

"No, stop her!" breathed Jack in a shout of awe, and shuddered.

The horse was tearing back again—

twice as fast, twice as frightened and unmanageable.

Roxy had given Bob a push, for as he half-guessed her purpose he put out a detaining hand.

The nimble sprite slipped its touch as if she was a vanishing shadow.

Roxy flew rather than ran to the extreme edge of the sidewalk.

As the horse came tearing up, she started a lateral dash that would cross its direct course.

The animal never swerved now—in trampling disdain of all impediments, it seemed bound to clear the end of the street this time.

"Up!" voiced Roxy, and up she went.

The word was clear and ringing as the vivacious "Houp-la!" of the circus-bred equestrienne.

"She'll never make it!" quavered Bob.

"It's a breakneck dash!" muttered the appalled Jack.

"She has made it—oh, glory!" gasped Buff, and shook with suspense and excitement.

He saw a picture he never forgot—a dainty form clearing the air like that of an acrobat shot from a spring-board—two dainty feet striking the saddle, true and firm as if rock-rooted.

Then gracefully down into the saddle Roxy slipped, and seized the bridle rein.

"At home!" she smiled grittily.

Snap!

She had counted the victory fairly won with a safe landing effected in the saddle.

The struggle had barely begun—she realized one second later.

The man who had been swung stunned from the bridle rein had weakened its hold on the bit.

Roxy's masterly grip upon it had snapped it clear now.

The horse gave a wild neigh and a shake of its proud, arched head.

Over its ears slipped the bridle, free of Roxy's hands slipped the rein, and forward, untrammelled by bit or check now the steed fairly flew.

Roxy gripped at the horse's long mane. Her eyes dilated a trifle.

She could tell from the pulsating

quiver of the horse's neck that its blood was raised to fever heat.

Stores, houses, people seemed to fly past her—she held closer to the ruffling, lashing mane, long and silky, and then she crouched.

With a tang the horse's forefeet struck a loose iron sewer cover.

It slid, tipped, went to its knees, was up in a flash, but a second snap told of a strain on its girths.

"The saddle—is slipping!" panted Roxy.

She whirled with it. Some appalled spectators uttered a shriek of terror at a sight of the revolving girl.

The saddle fell, was kicked from under the hoofs of the horse, but the dauntless girl rider did not follow it.

Half way down she went—her skirts trailing, her feet almost touching the ground.

Up again, her white hands buried in the thick mane, she came with a trained spring she had never forgotten.

"Now, go—and I go with you!" breathed the daring equestrienne dauntlessly.

To attempt to check, to turn the horse, was now impossible.

There were shouts, carried away in rapid echo as they spurred up the affrighted horse.

Missiles were thrown—one struck Roxy—wild, jerking curves were made as people tried to wave the animal to a halt.

Then Roxy felt herself lift—the horse, coming to a street where some asphalt paving was in progress, had leaped the board guard barring the fresh set cement.

Its feet sank, it slipped twice. Roxy fancied a fall was imminent, but fifty yards progressed the animal turned where a planking slanted for a high frame gate.

It turned sharply at finding it shut.

A small narrow pedestrian gateway showed beyond—never letting up on its furious gait the horse made for this.

Roxy looked, braced, and got ready to avert a grazing, crushing contact.

As the horse bolted desperately through the narrow aperture, she let go its mane.

As it slipped from under her, Roxy sprang up, grasped the top of the extending boards, clung a minute, got her

breath, climbed up on a broken shed roof, and looked down into a stable yard.

There was a poled wagon directly beneath her, piled high with thin curly shavings—Roxy dropped into this instantly, so she would not be observed.

Horses were attached, as if the load was about to start out, but she did not particularly notice this.

Her attention was centred on two men in the stable yard, and among the light shavings she burrowed and pushed, and getting her face close up to the side she could both see and hear.

The horse she had ridden—reeking, panting, trembling in every limb—had come to a stop and had evidently arrived at home.

The two men had run up to it. They looked like hostlers.

"Hello—I didn't know Wild Nance was out!" spoke one of them. "Why, where's she been—what's all this, and who—"

"S-sh!" interrupted the other, who was in his shirt sleeves, with a somewhat scared face. "Jim, help me out of a fix!"

"What kind of a fix?"

"This horse——"

"What's left of her—go on."

"I let her out at midnight."

"Boss know it?"

"No, and I want you to get her in her stall before he comes, and back in trim."

"In trim? Why, say! she's ruined. What fast riding hasn't done, cuts and jabs have. Who had her?"

The man in his shirt sleeves looked dreadfully worried.

"She may have run away," he muttered—"the fellow who had her is ugly-tempered and may have abused her. He wanted to make a run up north, and didn't want to trust to cars or cabs. I know him, and as he told me he was in a big money-making deal, and I was to share his prospects, I let the horse go."

"The boss will raise an awful row."

"Keep it from him, if you can."

"Who's the fellow that had her?"

"Well, he's keeping shady, and I have no right to mention names—he's a friend, that's all."

"Lives around here?"

"Did, but won't again. If he's injured

the horse he'll pay royally, for he'll be on velvet in a week."

"That's all promises."

"Oh! he'll be square. Besides, he gave me a fair starter."

"What?"

"Order for some back money due him. Used to work in a shoe factory. I can collect that. It's in my pocket there on——"

"Well, hustle the horse in. I'll fix her up best I know how."

The two men hurried with the steed toward the stable. Roxy strained her shaving-dashed vision to make out the "pocket there" alluded to.

A coat hung over one of the extending poles of the wagon she was in.

Roxy pushed the massed shavings aside, burrowed, crowded, reached out a hand.

In an inside pocket was a blank memorandum book—all the coat contained.

She noted several folded papers in it, but thrust it into her own pocket quickly for some one just then came into view.

It was the driver of the wagon she was in, and the first thing he did was to reach up the long-lashed whip he carried, remove the coat, throw it on the ground and mount to his seat.

"Get up!"

Roxy was undecided for a moment—so prompt an arrival, so speedy a departure, dazed her a trifle.

"All right!" she murmured, dropping back in the shavings. "I've accomplished all I can hope to—I've probably got the order that fellow spoke about, and that of course gives the name of the man we want to find."

She decided to let the wagon get out of the yard into the street and then quietly drop out.

The vehicle moved forward. Roxy worked her way toward the rear.

The side poles were so near together that she could not possibly squeeze through.

Edging along, she paused momentarily.

"Get off there!" she heard the driver yell.

There were some mumbling sounds directly behind.

"No one's hurting," spoke up a juvenile voice.

"No hitching, do you hear?"

Snap! came a lash crack—the driver had "whipped behind."

With a bellow one of the hitchers fell astern.

"Drop, chumsey!" he yelled. "He's got a long whip."

"In a minute."

"Cuts like a knife—the old snoozer! He'll see you——"

"He'll see something else, purty soon!" was chuckled back. "Now, run and hide, for there's going to be an excitement!"

The driver did not "see," as predicted, at once—but Roxy did.

Saw and heard both—saw a flash and heard a crackle, and knew that the great load of tindery shavings had been set on fire.

CHAPTER II.

"EX-KING OF THE NEWSBOYS."

Nick Carter's girl detective found herself in the midst of flames so suddenly that it made her head whirl.

The driver's whip snap had cost him a load of horse bedding, for the match had certainly been applied by the mischievous, malicious urchin, who, with his companion, had now fled.

"Hi, there! look—you're all ablaze!" Roxy heard some one shout.

"Whoa!"

With a startled yell the driver halted his team, and Roxy heard his feet slam on the roadway.

"Put it out!"

"Turn in an alarm!"

"Whoa—whoa—stop them!"

A babel of voices, a riotous commotion surrounded Roxy with startling suddenness.

She ceased tracing the course of events by the same as she faced critical peril directly at her elbow.

Like dry prairie grass, the tindery shavings curled into streaks of vivid fire with appalling rapidity.

A spark or the motion must have frightened the horses, for up they had started.

"In a runaway—all ablaze!" breathed Roxy in real concern—"why, I've got to get out!"

It was easily said, hard to do—energy became desperation as Roxy realized the peculiarity of her environment.

Burrow up she could not—a clutch, a climb, only brought the shavings more compactly about her.

She could not squeeze through the side poles—they were less than four inches apart.

The wagon was rocking from side to side now—fanning the flames—and these were eating their way closer and closer to her.

Roxy tore a clear space from the poles, seized one, began an ascent.

"What's coming?" she fluttered.

A tip had come—a crash, a graze, and she was flung across a blazing, outspread mass.

Her clothing had got on fire. Roxy rolled, crept, staggered into the middle of the street from amid the upset wagon load. Then she made a bolt.

It was a dive for deliverance near at hand, and she felt she could not utilize it too quickly.

The runaway shavings wagon had collided with a sprinkling cart—she was under its cascading back rim in a flash.

"Put out!" she shivered. "Drenched, but—better than roasting."

Roxy got out of public view as speedily as possible.

There was no point to be gained in remaining to be questioned, and all she had gone through counted as natural incidents attending professional duty.

She got out of immediate sight of the immediate vicinity, and made for the home of her aunt, where she lived.

She was a new Roxy in attire and hopefulness as she started for Nick Carter's home an hour later.

The memorandum book she had secured in the stable yard had given her the reward she counted on—the pay order the hostler had referred to.

It was to the name signed to the same that Roxy attributed considerable importance, and she believed that her expert patron and his pupils would deem it likewise of value.

Roxy ran up the steps of the veteran detective's home with light feet and a light heart.

A slight shade of anxiety left the

kindly, inquiring face of Nick Carter as he greeted his famous little protegee.

"Boys here?" was Roxy's first eager query.

"Buff, Aleck and Larry only—the others, Bob and Jack, are trying to find out what became of you."

"You see," smiled Roxy.

"See what?"

"That I'm back safe and sound from my morning ride."

"Tell us about it, Roxy."

"Just a quick dash, Mr. Carter, that's all, and—results."

"Ah!"

"I've found out the name of the man we are after."

"Nick's eyes expressed the liveliest satisfaction.

"Who's that—Roxy? What's that—got the man's name?" interrupted Buff, just here bursting into the room.

"That's right," nodded the flower girl.

"Oh, Roxy! you're just scrumptious."

"If 'scrumptious' means finding out if we've got a chance to hunt up that missing girl, I am, dreadfully so," confessed Roxy.

"Yes, no time must be lost," insisted Nick, with seriousness. "The case is a mystery at the start. I have received a second urgent telegram from the preceptress of the New Haven seminary from which the girl, Elsie Deane, was decoyed."

"Have you?" murmured Roxy.

"It urges prompt action," went on Nick. "The first message simply insinuated that a man had appeared with an order ostensibly from Elsie Deane's father, and that later the preceptress suspected all was not right."

"And further?" insinuated Roxy.

"I learn that the Deane girl is something of a mystery in herself. It seems that ten years ago her father placed her in the school, paid her tuition till she was twenty-one, and has never written nor visited her since."

Roxy looked immensely interested.

"Regular story-book case," commented Buff.

"Comparing carefully the handwriting in the order the man brought with an old signature of the girl's father, and think-

ing over the alleged messenger's hard appearance, the preceptress is sure some crooked work has been done."

"The later actions of the man show sinister secrecy, that is sure," added Roxy.

"He has moved like a fugitive, a plotter, certainly," mused Nick. "Well, we will find him first and trace out his scheme later. Who is he Roxy?"

"Used to work in a shoe factory here, but has abandoned his former home and haunts."

"Recently?"

"Yes," and Roxy related what she had overheard the hostler say. "He gave the hostler an order. It bears his name. It is on a shoe factory. I stopped there on the way here and made some inquiries. He is a kind of a roving gypsy character, and has been arrested several times."

"What is his name, did you say?"

"I didn't say, but there it is," answered Roxy, producing the signed order.

"'Jack Downey,'" read the detective.

"What's that!" cried Buff, with a jump.

"Does it sound familiar?"

"I know the man!"

"There may be more than one Jack Downey?"

"My Downey worked in a shoe factory."

"That tallies," said Roxy.

"And, come to think of it, he answers the description given of the kidnapper."

"Where is he to be found?" asked Nick.

"He never was an easy man to find," explained Buff. "I only saw him twice. He is Chuck Downey's father."

"And who's Chuck Downey?"

"Used to be a newsboy."

"And where is he?"

"I don't know, but you can imagine it won't be hard for me to find out," answered Buff.

"Scarcely. The ex-king of the New York newsboys ought to be able to unearth that end of the case."

"None better," nodded Roxy. "Find him right off, Buff. He probably knows where his father is."

"Shall we work to that end?" inquired Buff of his patron.

"Promptly."

Buff left the room. Roxy and Nick, deep in a discussion of the case in hand, looked up as if at an intruder as Buff re-entered the apartment ten minutes later.

For a flashing second they were fairly deceived.

"Buff," vouchsafed Nick, "you're make-up is inimitable!"

"The best yet!" applauded Roxy, sincerely.

"It's not a make-up, remember," urged Buff—"natural character, Mr. Carter. Do you remember the day you took me out of the streets and started me in detecting?"

"I remember perfectly," smiled Nick.

"I kept the old newsboy suit, you see. Am I the old Buff?"

"As if it was only yesterday," murmured Roxy.

"Come on, then—you must come with me, Roxy."

"Must I, Buff?"

"I think you'd better. I've got all kinds of dens to go into, for Chuck Downey is a tough one. When I lay my eyes on him you must spell me, for he'd suspect me in a flash if I tried to shadow him."

"That's so."

"Get the trail quick as you can," advised Nick, as the twain started away. "This fellow, the elder Downey, may be planning to leave New York city."

"Now, then, Roxy, understand your bearings," spoke Buff, as they stood in the vestibule. "I'll go ahead."

"And I am simply to keep you in view."

"It may be a 'hard simply'."

"Oh, I'll stick."

"I've no doubt of that, only we may have a long search. You see, this Chuck is a regular bully and bruiser."

"Is he?"

"I had to lay him out, once or twice, in the old days, to get solid with the newsboys."

"I see, Buff."

"He did not see for a month!" smiled Buff, "and that will make him sore. He trains with a crowd that never cared much for me, and that suggests that I will have to go among them eating humble pie."

Buff explained fully what he meant by this, and gave Roxy explicit directions as to what she was expected to do.

Roxy fancied she knew most of the queer turns and windings of the great city, but two hours of trailing Buff convinced her that the inner life of a great juvenile element was something she had never imagined.

Buff knew where to find Chuck—if anywhere, in some of the loafing haunts of the idle, shiftless gamins who preyed on fellow workers and humanity in general.

He visited half a dozen wharf shanties, barn lofts, and cellars of burned down and abandoned buildings.

Finally Buff penetrated the debris-littered area way of a building begun, but never finished.

A hole in a brick wall led under the sidewalk.

Just as there are grades in the habitations of different classed gamblers, so he knew the same system to exist among the street gamins.

This had always been a "boozing ken" for the most idle and vicious class, and Buff realized that he was taking the risk of some pretty hard knocks in seeking admittance.

It had an oil stove, bunks, benches, and tables—it was a living place as well as a loafing place.

Half a dozen boys, grimy as himself, looked up curiously and suspiciously as he came into view.

"Hello!" grinned Buff.

The crowd stared.

"Say," slowly pronounced an incredulous tone—"if it ain't Buff!"

"What's dat?" sounded gruffly a voice from a bench.

A big, hunch-shouldered fellow slouched up into view.

Buff's eyes snapped—he had found his game. The speaker was Chuck Downey.

Then they veiled to shrewd watchfulness, for as the fellow loped forward, Buff instinctively realized that there was "blood in the air!"

"What's dat?" repeated Chuck Downey, with a dreadful frown.

"It's Buff—Buff Hutchinson."

"Our old king of the newsboys—"

"King of nit—nawtin', see! It's youse,

is it?" gated the big bully, fixing a consuming look on the intruder as if he would scorn him.

"Yes, its me, nodded Buff—"onto his job" perfectly—in a meek, scared-seeming way.

"Going to scrap!" went the rounds, whisperingly.

"Stand up like a man, Buff!" encouraged a cheering voice.

"Dat's it—stand up like a man!" growled Chuck Downey, knobbing his great fists belligerently, "stand up like a man, for I'm going to knock you down like an ox!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BLUE CHALK MARK.

Buff, as has been said, was "onto his job."

In other words, he looked entirely to the end to be reached, and he did not shrink from the unpleasant part he had to play.

He had "licked" every fellow in the place—big, brawny Chuck Downey included—in the old days when he had been forced to sustain his supremacy as king of the New York newsboys.

Not as a fighter nor a king, however, could Buff find any excuse for invading the present den.

He had suspicions to allay, impressions to make, and he knew it would take both shrewd and humiliating tactics to carry his point.

His face was a seeming map of misery, as he affected to shrink and shrivel before the fierce, blatant bully who was about to "knock him down like an ox."

"You leave me be!" half whined Buff.

"Whew!" whistled the fellow, who had told him to stand up like a man. "Say, gimme de hooks! but here's a sight to make a fader weep!"

"I should say so!" piped a second. "Dis ain't Buff, a-crawfishin' like dat. Why! de Buff I onct knew would stand up afore a giant!"

"Yaas, dis is Buff!" leered Chuck Downey, rolling up his sleeves—"wid all de spirit gone outen him, see? Dat's wot comes of flyin' high an' trainin' wid does detective stiffs. I t'ought he'd come sneakin' back—puttin' on de frills as a

Nick Carter fly cop, pinchin' guys wid de dignity of a inspector! Sa-ay, dey fired you, did dey?"

Buff looked glum, and muttered something about "being sorry he learned the trade."

"Well, I've been a-longin' for you. Come up to de scratch. Flip yer dukies, fer I'm goin' to pay off old scores."

"I tell you to leave me be! I'm—I'm sick," whimpered Buff.

"Bah!"

Chuck Downey made a swipe at Buff. He missed, for Buff dodged.

Then he clinched. It was a trifle singular, for while Chuck pawed and struck out continually, notwithstanding the fact that Buff played the coward complete, the latter got the best of it.

He blubberingly clung to his adversary so he could not get in a single fair blow, he trod all over Chuck's toes, he tore his coat, and once when they fell he landed on top of Chuck, as if by sheer clumsy accident, with a force that almost stunned his enemy.

"Aw, leave him be! Mebbe he is sick," suggested a voice.

"He's a baby, see?" growled Chuck, mad and smarting. "If he won't stand up, I can't maul him, dat's all, but look here, cully! when I come back to-night you make a sneak, or I'll lame you, sick or well."

No one noticed it, but in the scrimmage Buff had effected something he particularly aimed at.

He had drawn a short but plain line in blue chalk across the back of Chuck Downey's coat.

He watched the fellow's departure with veiled satisfaction—the more so as he heard Chuck inform a crony that he'd be back with a "wad," as he had an appointment "wid de old man."

"If he's bound for his father," chuckled Buff, "and Roxy outside waiting to secretly escort him—I'll know, when he comes back."

The crowd paid little attention to Buff the rest of the day.

Vagabond usage admitted of his claiming a harborage, but he was in humiliating disfavor.

An unthroned monarch, Buff swallowed some pretty bitter taunts, but he

solaced himself with some reflections that would have startled the crowd had its members been able to scan the same.

Buff put in a monotonous afternoon. He was sorry now that he had not arranged differently with Roxy, for the inactive wait galled him.

About five o'clock, however, his energies took a vivid spur—Chuck Downey came back.

He was jovial and airy. He wore a new necktie blazing as a poppy, smoked an immense cigar, and rattled his hands in his pockets to the accompaniment of a musical silvery chink.

"Dat ain't coin, Downey?" grinned one of his cohorts.

"Dat is coin. Fellies," announced Chuck, "me old man's struck a Klondike. Here, some one rush de mug," and he threw down a dollar. "Where's de prod?"

The "prodigal," as Chuck facetiously denominated Buff, was edging his head every way to get a look at the back of Chuck Downey's coat.

"Good!" he commented, as he finally succeeded.

Across the blue chalk mark was a red chalk mark—it meant that Roxy had done her share.

Buff took a step toward the hole in the sidewalk. He had finished his business with Mr. Chuck Downey.

"Dat'll do!" spoke the latter, interruptingly. "You go back and sit down. I want to have some fun wid you dis eve, see?"

"Have it now."

"Hey!"

Buff had come squarely up to his adversary.

In profound surprise the gang crowded around—the last one of them noticing the sudden remarkable change in Buff's manner.

"Have some fun with me now," went on Buff, briskly. "Pull my nose—see, that way! Chuck my chin—here's the paper. Biff me—ha! ha! one! two! three! Keep it up—and down you go!"

"Crackey!"

"Sa-ay, he's de old Buff, sure enough!"

"He was foolin'."

"He's—he's—it was a stall! I see t'rough it. Stop him! He isn't fired

from Nick Carter's at all—he's been putting up a job on us of some kind. Mebbe he's after me old man, and—trun him down! trun him down!"

"Anybody want to stop me?" inquired Buff, blandly, as at the wild cry of their prostrate leader several started forward as if to intercept his assailant.

"No? Thanks. Good-night!"

Buff got out speedily. His face was a very eager one as he reached the street and looked up and down it.

A dainty form stepped from a doorway, waved a quick signal, started on, and Buff caught up.

"Roxy," he said. "On hand."

"According to agreement."

"You followed Chuck Downey?"

"I followed the blue chalk mark, yes," answered Roxy.

"And he went——"

"Straight to his father."

"And his father?"

"Has got the girl with him."

"Good! and the girl with him?"

"I've seen her."

"Glorious!"

"And I've come back for you."

"To take her away?"

"No."

Buff looked surprised.

"See here, Roxy," he said, "it seems to me if you've found the girl——"

"I have. She's scared to death. Poor thing! she don't know what life means. For ten years she's lived among her schoolmates—knows no home, no parents, nothing but mystery and uncertainty."

"And the fellow who got her?"

"Claims that he is to take her to her father to-night."

"Which you don't believe?"

"Not a bit of it!"

"So?"

"I've got a scheme."

"What, Roxy?"

"I want you to go and get Bob."

"At Mr. Carter's."

"If he's there—I want both of you to come with me."

"Up to where the girl is?"

"Exactly. I'll meet you at just seven o'clock."

"Where?"

Roxy mentioned a corner in the neighborhood of Union Square.

"Is it safe to leave the girl and Downey unwatched that long?" ventured Buff, dubiously.

"I'll watch them, never fear!"

"All right."

Buff departed, but vaguely dissatisfied.

There was a queer, thoughtful expression to Roxy's eyes—a certain reserve in her manner that mystified him.

He had learned from experience, however, that will-power was never perversity in Nick Carter's clever detective, and he guessed that Roxy knew fully what she was about, and would prove it at the seven o'clock meeting.

CHAPTER IV.

ROXY'S "SCHEME."

Bob Ferret did not come home till nearly half-past six, and Buff had to hurry him to keep the appointment with Roxy.

She met them with considerable excitement of manner.

It was instantly imparted to Buff, as one side of her face, turned toward a bright street light, came into full view.

"Hello!" he began.

"Why! hurt, Roxy?" interrogated Bob, observing, too.

"Hardly," smiled Roxy.

"That bruise——"

"Oh! it's not a bruise, Bob."

"It's not?"

"Look closer."

Bob did look. The dark brown blur, on near inspection, turned out to be a mark—smooth and natural as if ingrained with the flesh.

"That's a birthmark," announced Roxy.

"Never noticed it before," said Buff.

"Never needed it before," smiled Roxy, pertly.

"Oh!" muttered Buff.

"Do you now?" inquired Bob.

"Very much. Boys, I've got something to tell you."

"That was easy to guess all along," remarked Buff.

"I've seen this girl, Elsie Deane," said Roxy. "I've talked with her."

"Talked with her?" repeated Bob, in some surprise.

"Yes. She is so frightened I had a time winning her confidence."

"Why was she stolen?"

"She has not the remotest idea. Downey has treated her civilly enough but she feels that some horrible plot is brooding. At about ten o'clock to-night he is going to take her, he tells her, to her father."

"And she wants to go?"

"No, no!—and I intend that she shall not," answered Roxy, with animation. "I want you to come to the house where she is, and Buff must take her to Mr. Carter, who will return her to her school or place her in other safe hands, as he thinks best, until I find out what game is up."

"How are you going to find out, Roxy?" inquired Buff.

"Well, Buff, I am going to take this girl's place."

"Whew!" commented Buff.

"It's like you!" ejaculated Bob.

The cat was out of the bag at last.

"You see this mark on my cheek?" when on Roxy. "It's a copy of the one the girl has. You see this necklace with a funny old-fashioned charm? That's hers. I shall change clothes with her. I shall be Elsie Deane, to all intents and purposes."

"But——"

"I shall keep veiled, as she keeps veiled. I shall only be in Downey's hands till he delivers me to this pretended father, and I am satisfied that the pretended father never saw Elsie Deane in his life, and therefore won't know me from her."

"And then, Roxy?" inquired Bob, quite anxiously.

"Stay with him till I find out what he's up to."

"You may be walking into a fearful trap!"

"I shall risk it."

"One of us should shadow your lead."

"That's what I wanted you for, Bob."

"Excellent! I approve," declared Bob, enthusiastically. "That puts a different phase on the matter."

"Come."

Roxy led her two companions to a tenement house on a quiet street.

It was dark now, and they stole up the stairs noiselessly and unseen.

Roxy unlocked the door of a vacant room, crossed it, and paused.

"In that room," she whispered, pointing to one door, "Downey is sleeping. In this," pointing to the other, "is the girl, Elsie Deane. Let me go in alone."

She fitted a key. There were low, rustling sounds.

When she came out, the dim light from the street penetrating the windows showed that she led a girl about her own height.

"You will go with these friends of mine," she whispered to her trembling, timid companion. "They will put you in safe hands."

"But you——" began a quavering, anxious voice framed with signs of a sobbing outbreak.

"Get her away—quick, Bob!" directed Roxy, "and on the trail before ten o'clock, if you think it best."

"Best?" murmured Bob. "I wouldn't miss a hand in this superb mystery for a thousand dollars!"

Across the room and out to the street in safety passed the two young detectives and their charge.

Into the captive's apartment, relocking the door, attired in the captive's garb, went Roxy.

"Now, then, to wait," she murmured. "I shall not feel safe till I get into this pretended father's hands, and Downey out of the way of discovering the transposition."

"Worked like a charm!" commented Nick Carter's girl detective three hours later.

As she had planned, it had happened.

Downey had entered the room, gruffly bade her follow him, and Roxy was ready veiled for the occasion.

He paid less attention to her than to the persons he passed on the street, as if watchful for enemies or the police.

He led quite a long walk, and it ended under a lamp-post at the corner of two poorly tenanted streets.

Here Downey stood for several minutes, holding to Roxy's arm.

Finally a man approached—a short, dark-faced fellow with long tawny hair.

"Downey?" he said, simply.

"That's right, Vasa," nodded the other.

"This is the girl?"

"Yes."

"You shall hear from me. Come."

Roxy breathed more freely. She had passed the ordeal of possible recognition.

The man called Vasa regarded her critically, and keeping close to her side started down the darkest diverging street.

He turned into what Roxy took for an emigrant, inn from what she could see of it.

Her guide and new guardian, however, did not enter it.

Instead, he turned into its broad stable yard, and went up to a large boxed-in vehicle.

It was ponderous as the biggest cage wagon, and steps came down from a rear door.

This the man opened.

"Get in," he ordered, uncivilly.

Roxy obeyed.

The man followed, striking a match. As he lighted a lamp Roxy saw by its gleams that she was in a regular house on wheels.

It had two divided sleeping compartments, a cooking space, and in the front what looked like a Punch and Judy outfit.

The man set her a stool.

"Take off your things—let me have a look at you," he ordered, gruffly.

Roxy did not demur. She noticed the man's eyes keenly scanning the mock scar on her cheek and the necklace she had taken from the real Elsie Deane.

"You are my child, my daughter—do you understand?" projected the man, in decidedly unparental accents. "I'm your father."

"Are you?" murmured Roxy.

"I am, and I want no trifling, sobs, hysterics. Downey tells me you are quiet enough, but no drivellings with me. Do you hear?"

He gave her arm a cruel pinch as if to impress her with a due sense of fear.

"Don't you do that again—you hurt me!" spoke Roxy, trying hard to keep her temper.

"Ha! ha! Then know me. My boarding school miss, I've spent all the money I intend to on you. It's hard knocks and strict obedience now—you mark me!"

"I will mark you!" muttered Roxy, under her breath.

The fellow took out a pipe and filled it. He struck a match and lit it.

Roxy saw his game—to terrify her—and Roxy was "riled up" at the cruel pinch.

She half arose, and out went her hand almost before she could control it.

Quick as a flash she slapped the pipe from the man's mouth.

Knocking it spinning, she directed at the astonished Vasa a look that made him quail, with the incisive words:

"Keep your pipe out of your mouth in the presence of a lady!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF A PUZZLE.

"Why! I'll—I'll mash you!"

Roxy's prompt resentment of her guardian's pinch and uncivility had acted like a vivid shock on the gipsy-faced Vasa.

For half a second he stared, in half a second more he was furiously groping for a stick, a broom, anything to vent his ungovernable rage on the captive who had defied him.

"Murter!"

Vasa turned quickly to the open rear door of the wagon.

Roxy glanced thither, too.

"I'm plinded—ach! I'm vorse dan zightless."

"What's this?" growled Vasa.

A crisp-whispered, active, hopping form stumbled into the vehicle.

One hand was held across one eye, the other waved a cane in all kinds of spasmodic emotion.

Its owner seemed to be a young Jew peddler, for a light pack was strapped across his shoulders.

"Here—who are you? get out——" began Vasa.

"It's put out!" wailed the dancing intruder.

"What is?"

"Mein eyes. Vat hit me? Ouf! put I am plinded."

"The pipe bowl must have struck you," growled Vasa, with a wrathful

look at Roxy. "Girl, I'll whip the life out of you!"

"Try it!" defied Roxy.

"Yes, yes—mein frent!" spoke up the peddler. "Vas it her who did it?"

"My undutiful daughter."

"Cashtigate her! cashtigate her!" vociferated the peddler. "Here vos mein cane. Give it to her—it is meats and drinks to me to see an onruly child cash-tigated! How's that?"

"Oh, you wretch!"

"How's that?" had been whispered for Roxy's benefit solely, and Roxy caught the cue.

Bob the invincible, Bob the inimitable, had fairly laughed in her wondering face!

She made a sign with her finger tips as if she would like to tear his eyes out for advising a "cashtigation."

And then she realized that Bob would not make himself solid with Vasa at the expense of any very hard knocks to herself, and wondered what point her unapproachable colleague hoped to make by appearing on the scene so speedily and so boldly.

Bob's disguise was superb.

It was one of his star assumptions, and he had the voice and the gestures to carry out a personality that had at the first deceived even Roxy.

He stumbled over to a stool uninvited, and sat down groaning, and rubbing and blinking one eye.

Vasa gritted his teeth savagely as he looked for his pipe bowl and came back examining it.

"The she-tiger has smashed it!" he muttered. "Meek, angelic, Downey said. Yes, she is! Now then, my man, what can I do for you?"

"I finds me family droubles here."

"Never mind that—I'll attend to my own affairs."

"I dinks dat daughter of yours needs vatching—she has a bad eye!"

Roxy made a disdainful grimace.

"I'll bring tears to it before I'm through with her!" promised Vasa, spitefully. "Never you mind that."

"I haf to mind it—such vickedness vascinate me!"

Bob was "having fun" with Roxy,

and she promised herself to get even with him next time he was in a fix.

"Have you business with me?" demanded Vasa, bluntly.

"Dat's it."

"Well?"

"Dot girl knocked it oud of me."

"Be brisk, now!"

"I am a Chewish pettler."

"You don't need any signs."

"Ha! ha! ferry goot! I am traveling—nort."

"What's that to me?"

"You are going nort."

"How do you know that?" queried Vasa, with a quick look.

"I heard de hotel geeper say it."

"Well? well?"

"He toldt me you vas looking for a driver."

"I've changed my mind."

"Dot you had a sore hand."

"It's getting well," answered Vasa, moving into view a hand slightly bandaged.

"You don't vant a driver, then?"

"I don't."

"Maybe you vould oxcept a bassinger for gompany?"

"Not lonely."

"De girl may be."

"Hey?"

"Or get skeezicksy, flare up—she has a bad eye. She is bositively dangerous. Ouf you don't vant a driver, do you vant a guest, a poarder, a vatcher, a frent?"

"You seem mighty anxious to go with me," insinuated Vasa.

"Egsactly. Vy not? I hears you are going mit your Bunich and Chudy show nort—slowly. Dot suits me. I vorks de vil-lages mit my goots ven you rest. It is sheap. I can maybe vork out my poard—hey?"

Vasa's eye regarded Bob keenly, and then he dropped it in a reflective way.

"All right," he said, finally.

"Vot vos all right, mein frent?" interrogated the disguised Bob.

"You can come."

"Goot!"

"Be on hand at daylight."

"Egsellent!"

"If you know how to drive——"

"Drive!—vy! I vonce drove mools on

de canal. Daylight? You'll find me here."

Vasa bundled his prospective employee out of the wagon.

As he locked its door and turned, Roxy observed that his face looked both-ered.

"See here, my girl," he growled, "I want no trouble with you."

"Then treat me like a lady."

"If my smoking don't suit you, go to your own room—there it is. Do you want anything to eat?"

"I'm not hungry."

"All right."

"Except for information."

"What's that?" scowled Vasa, bridling.

"I'd like to know something."

"I suppose you would!" jeered Vasa.

"You'd like to know why you're taken from the delicacies of a fashionable boarding-school and booked onto a cheap Punch and Judy show, eh?"

"Yes, I would."

"Well, behave yourself, and you may find out."

"I always behave myself."

"You didn't just now."

"That's a question of taste."

"A father usually runs his own house."

Roxy reflected a moment. Then she ventured a bold move to force issues, if possible.

"Say," she said, plainly, "you're not my father."

The man gave a prodigious start.

"Eh? Oh! Ah—why not?" he projected, stammeringly.

"Well, I don't believe you are."

"I've got some papers that would prove it, all the same, and give me the power to lock you up if you try to run away from me."

"They're easy."

Roxy's unflinching audacity made Vasa blink.

He studied her keenly, and he looked disturbed.

"If I'm not your father," he said, finally, "why do you suppose I'm taking the trouble to cart you all over the country?"

"I don't know."

"I'll tell you."

"Go ahead."

"Do you like diamonds?"

Roxy stared a little.

"Why, yes," she admitted.

Vasa's eyes glittered with a sinister glow as he bent toward her.

"Then here's my best word for the present," he said, mysteriously—"you stick to me, and you'll wear them."

He went out with the words, locking the door after him, leaving Roxy quite reflective.

The little sprite loved mystery and was quite as fascinated with the excitement of her detective profession.

Large scope promised in this respect with the case in which she was so singularly placed.

"I can't see ahead," she mused, "but it will have a dazzle when it comes, I guess. Bob will be with me, we're at the active end of the case, I think everything is moving all right."

Roxy made a cursory investigation of the wagon.

She found it to be what it had at first suggested to her—a traveling cheap show van.

Her "room" was small, but clean and cozy, and the cooking space seemed well supplied with victuals.

"A trip, even a long one, in this affair wouldn't be very hard work," she decided. "It's just wait patiently now—for those diamonds I'm going to wear, 'if I behave myself!'"

Roxy found a book, lit a candle, and went into the apartment assigned to her to put in an hour or two reading.

She must have lost herself in the middle of a chapter, for beyond that she remembered nothing, until a jolt sent the book out of her lap to the floor and she realized that the wagon was moving.

She went out toward the rear door.

It was locked, and she proceeded to the front.

Here an open slit afforded a view of the driver's seat, the road and general surroundings.

"Still night," ruminated Roxy. "Vasa alone, driving. We're out of the city on some country road."

Roxy saw that Bob's programme to accompany the expedition had miscarried in some way.

It was very easy for her to force the rear door of the wagon and make off, but of course she had no motive in doing this.

She dozed until morning, and after the wagon came to a stop came out to find that it had been driven into a roadside clump of trees.

"Do you know how to cook a breakfast?" inquired Vasa.

"I guess," nodded Roxy.

"Ours won't cook itself—but there's lots of provender aboard."

Roxy's ready manipulation of culinary utilities rather put Vasa in good humor. She ventured to engage him in conversation.

"I thought you was going to hire that horrid peddler to drive your wagon?" she insinuated.

Vasa blinked cunningly.

"No, no—no strangers for me!" he chuckled—"have to get up early to catch this weasel asleep!"

"Oh, you gave him the slip?"

"Just."

"Have we gone far?"

"About twenty miles."

"And when are you going to give a show?" inquired Roxy.

"Eh?" stared the man.

"Punch and Judy?"

"Oh! don't bother your head about that—I'm not going to give any show at present."

"Aren't you?"

"No."

"Just travel, eh?" pressed Roxy.

"You've got it—just travel."

"How far, now?"

Vasa fixed a shrewd eye on his interlocutor.

"Say, girl," he vouchsafed, "Downey said you was milk and water. Oh, yes! I don't know where you got your eye teeth cut, but they're clear through, I can see that. You can act, and you've got spirit. Until I read you a little better, I don't think I'll make a confidant of you."

"All right," retorted Roxy, indifferently, "I'm willing."

"Have to be."

"Keeping in view that there's to be diamonds to wear at the end of it all, you know!" remarked Roxy, shrewdly.

Vasa had four horses to draw the wagon, and he let them rest and attended to them up till noon.

He made no objection to Roxy sitting down and reading under the trees, but as he went back into the wagon he placed himself so that he could keep track of her movements with a mere turn of his head.

Against the side of the wagon Roxy had noticed what looked like an oblong box.

Placing a stool beside this, Roxy saw Vasa pull it up, set a brace under it and transfer it into a very convenient desk.

He unlocked its single drawer and took out a long flat wallet filled with papers.

For nearly an hour he studied over these, consulted a calendar, his watch, a road map of the country, and put the wallet back into the desk.

"Oh, for a glance!" murmured Roxy, who had watched Vasa's slightest movement.

The papers might or might not appertain to the present journey and Elsie Deane.

Roxy however fancied that they did.

"And I'm going to find out!" she declared.

Her opportunity came two hours later.

Vasa had hitched up the horses and remounted the driver's seat, after locking Roxy in securely as usual.

She examined the box desk the very first thing.

It was not particularly strong, but she was averse to creating suspicion by tampering with it in any way that would leave traces.

"I can slip back the lock plate with a knife, I believe," murmured Roxy. "A sharp pull will fetch it, then."

Roxy worked at the drawer for nearly half an hour.

She got the lock loosened to her satisfaction.

Seizing the two handles to the drawer, she gave it a hard, pressing, downward pull.

"It's—come!" she breathed, with a tumble.

The drawer had come, but so suddenly and forcibly that it sent Roxy backward and the drawer up.

It's contents went showering over her

head against the other side of the wagon.

Roxy dropped the drawer quickly to recover them.

A writing-pad, a pen holder, a book, a brush, a comb—her eye ran casually over these.

"The wallet," she murmured, observing it—"oh, mercy!"

A jolt joggled her, and the same jolt joggled the wallet.

Toward it Roxy made a frantic, breathless dive.

It lay dangerously near the edge of a little opening in the floor of the wagon through which Vasa was wont to poke sweepings and coffee grounds.

Roxy's hand came with a slap toward the wallet—slipping, slipping.

"Gone!"

Her finger tips grazed it.

Grazed it only, for the jolt just at that instant carried it through the hole, and it dropped into the dusty road, out of reach and out of sight.

CHAPTER VI.

A "QUIET" SMOKE.

Nick Carter's girl detective gave a breathless gasp.

"I've done it!" she voiced, in vivid dismay.

Roxy ran at the back door of the wagon, bit her forceful dash ended in a sensible halt.

The only way to get it open was either to batter it down bodily, or take time working at its lock, as she had at the drawer of the desk.

She deemed it dangerous policy to in any way acquaint Vasa with what she had done.

In half an hour's time, a run back the road would mean a practical abandonment of the guardian she had elected to stand by.

"The papers are gone," she murmured—"important or not, it's good-by to that wallet! Can't be of any great value, though, or Vasa wouldn't leave it in that old box rattle trap. I guess I'll have to content myself with fixing that up so he won't suspect that it's been tampered with. When he comes to discover that

the wallet is gone—well, I'll have to face it through, some way."

Roxy replaced the drawer in the desk.

She noticed, during the next hour or two, that the wagon made a good many turns and windings.

Vasa, too, indulged in numerous inquiries with people he passed.

Roxy traced these queries from generalization down to a narrowing point.

For instance, Vasa first sought information as to a certain road.

Apparently gaining this, his interest seemed to centre on a specific branch of the same.

Scoring this point, he was progressively solicitous as to the location of a certain woods.

Just before they penetrated them, he stopped a farmer's boy to ask about a famous oak tree that seemed to be a notable landmark of the district.

"Guess we're going to strike pay dirt pretty quick," reflected Roxy.

The flower girl was sure that something of urgency and importance was impending when the wagon was driven half a mile through a stretch of timber away from a traversed road.

Vasa was not only polite but attentive, as he unlocked the wagon door and asked Roxy to prepare supper.

"Then we'll take a stroll on foot," he vouchsafed.

"Will we?" murmured Roxy.

"Yes."

"Far."

"Oh, no."

"After anything?"

"Perhaps."

"Those diamonds you brag about, maybe!"

"Ha! ha! Maybe. Who can tell?"

Roxy bustled about and got the meal ready.

Vasa was restless and anxious when it was concluded. He watched the disappearing sun; he consulted his watch frequently; he seemed to be consumed with impatience, as if not knowing how to kill time.

He sat down finally under a tree and tried to get a few comfortable whiffs from his pipe.

He had to hold the battered bowl onto

the stem to do so, and tiring of this he grumblingly set it on a flat rock at his side.

Roxy pretended to be reading, but she studied the man's face and movements as if both were part of an unfolding puzzle.

She regretted that Bob had been put off the trail, and she wondered if, single-handed, she could cope with the unknown difficulties that might hedge the next definite step in the plot: all Vasa's circumlocution certainly disguised.

"Mein frent! mein frent!"

Roxy started up as joyous as if some one had given her a royal present.

The familiar accents of the night preceding were hopeful music to her ear.

"Safe, sure, Bob!" she murmured softly to herself in a glow of animated admiration and satisfaction.

"W-what!" shouted Vasa, recognizing the tones too, and springing to his feet, his features drawn into a disgruntled scowl.

Advancing from the nearest bushes, his face on a broad grin, his hand extended as if Vasa was his nearest of kin or the dearest friend in the world, the disguised Bob Ferret obtruded distinctly on Vasa's vision like a nightmare.

"What sent you here——" began the latter ill-naturedly.

"Gontract—sagred gontract. I overslept meinself. I lost you but I followed. I am here late, but on hand."

"Confusion!"

"Mein frent——"

"Back—oh, drat your clumsiness!"

"Mein gracious!"

"You've done it!"

Purposely or by accident, but acting the effusive, bubbling-over comrade to perfection, in approaching Vasa, Bob had stepped on the pipe lying on the rock.

His foot squashed half a wreck to a wreck entire.

"The girl made it so that it drew like a leaky chimney," grumbled Vasa. "Now you've fixed it, so I can't smoke at all!"

"Smash me, mein frent!" implored Bob almost at the point of tears. "I am a plunderer—I deserve to be thrashed!"

Vasa looked very leery. It was easy to see that Bob's arrival was particularly unwelcome at the present moment.

"When we come to the next town I

will pay you the costliest meerschaum—mit amber mouthpiece, gold tipped," promised Bob. "Till den, mein frent—hellup yourself!"

Bob extended a well-filled cigar case.

It was evident that Vasa did not wish to truckle with him.

The sight of the cigars and an ardent craving for a smoke proved, however, an irresistible temptation.

He selected a cigar, and he proceeded to light it, but he said uneasily:

"I don't see how I can have you with me now."

"Vy not, mein frent? vy not?" broke in shrewd Bob. "I can begin in the morning——"

"Oh! in the morning?" breathed Vasa with fervent relief. "You'll report then, will you?"

"Surely. I can vork a town dis evening. I am going soon. In the morning I vill report."

"That's it, that's all right," nodded Vasa, quite friendly and delighted at the prospect of getting rid of unwelcome company in the immediate present.

He puffed in tranquil enjoyment at the cigar, and he came out of his shell far enough to laugh at one or two jokes Bob sprung.

Roxy kept her eyes on the latter. It was good as a play, she voted.

She was afraid of Bob overdoing it, for he was animated and zestful now as a specialty star playing for applause.

Then she saw that a well-planned design had kept Bob chattering.

In the middle of a ridiculous story narrated in his liveliest dialect, Bob stopped short, jerked his finger in the direction of the male half of his audience, and said drolly:

"We put him to sleep!"

Roxy took a long stare at Vasa.

The cigar had fallen from his lips, his head had dropped to one side and his eyes were closed.

"Bob!" fluttered Roxy, half in enlightenment, half in query.

"Roxy!" chuckled her disguised colleague.

"That man——"

"This cigar!" projected Bob, picking it up.

"Loaded?"

"Worse than that."

"Doped!"

"On the truest scientific principles!"

"He won't wake up?"

"Maybe at midnight," responded Buff, airily.

"And meantime?"

"We'll bunk him in the wagon and proceed to business."

"You mean?"

"One thing at a time, Roxy," interrupted Bob. "He stole a march on me and I've had a hard tramp tracing him. Let's get him off our hands and then discuss the outlook."

They got the fellow into the wagon. He was like a lump of lead.

Bob locked the door, and glanced at his watch with much the studious attention that Vasa himself had recently displayed.

"Bob," ventured Roxy, "you're smart——"

"Thanks, Roxy!"

"Or you couldn't have made up for lost time the way you have, but does it strike you that in dosing that man you've put the stalking hound off the scent?"

"Not at all," smiled Bob tranquilly.

"I don't see——"

"I intend to take his place, just as you have taken Elsie Deane's place."

"But he was aiming for some definite point to-night."

"So am I."

"Probably going to show his entire hand."

"I've only forced it."

"If you are sure you guess enough about his intentions."

"Guess?" repeated Bob, with vehemence. "Why, Roxy, I positively know."

"You have discovered something, then?"

"Slightly."

"What?"

"This."

There was the flash of a dark object from Bob's pocket and a slap into his palm.

Roxy stared.

It was the wallet that she had lost through the hole in the floor of the wagon three hours previous.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASK OF GLASS.

"Is this the place, Bob?"

"According to the papers in that wallet—yes."

"The giant oak?"

"That's what they call it."

"I wonder what's coming?"

"We'll soon know."

"The papers in that wallet" had set Bob Ferret's mind in an active whirl.

He had picked it up in the dusty road where Roxy's accidental fling had hurled it, and it did not take the disguised trailer of the Punch and Judy van long to guess that it belonged to Vasa.

Now Vasa was asleep drugged in the wagon in question, and Bob, usurping his authority, was carrying out his programme the best he knew how.

He was badly in the dark yet. Among the papers were several documents proving the identity of Elsie Deane.

There was a map of this district, a reference to the giant oak, a direction under it that "the girl" should be brought thither on a certain day at a certain hour.

"That's just precisely this moment," pronounced Bob, consulting his watch.

"I wonder what it's all going to lead to?" murmured Roxy.

"There's not a hint in the papers as to that, but—here come the persons who can probably tell you," answered Bob.

"Now then, Roxy, you insist on posing as Elsie Deane."

"To the last! We can't back out now, and we can't find out what we want to know without going straight ahead."

"Four impressive looking men were advancing.

They were swarthy, dark-eyed as gypsies, and strength and character showed in each face.

Bob felt that their business was serious and earnest.

"You are the messenger?" spoke one in a low tone, advancing and scanning Roxy only.

Bob bowed.

"This is—the girl?"

"As you see."

"And the papers?"

"Here they are."

Bob was Jew peddler in appearance only.

"Take—go—your work is done."

Pressing something into his hand that was crisp and papery, the man dismissed Bob as if he was a discharged servant.

In a deft, quick, yet gentle way, Roxy was passed from hand to hand away from Bob's side, and hurried on toward a great grove of high bushes.

"I don't know about this!" muttered Bob.

He was impressed, dubious, mystified.

He was ready and curious to venture into all kinds of unknown dangers, but the very coolness with which Roxy followed a like intrepid course aroused his keenest anxieties.

"What's he given me?" murmured Bob, and he looked.

"Incredible!" he breathed, his glance growing to a stare.

Bob held in his hand a banknote of the largest denomination ever issued by the United States Government.

Ten thousand dollars!

"The price of a secret!" pulsed Bob terribly worked up, "and it must be big one. The price of a life?—Roxy's life?—I can't let her go on, blindfold. This is too deep, too sinister, too vague for me to allow her to take all the risk."

Bob plunged onward with the ardor of a chivalrous knight-errant.

He dodged behind a tree and crouched as he heard voices and made out two approaching forms.

"They're going to cover the advance," he calculated—"they've come back to block me. No!"

Bob stared in a good deal of surprise—the newcomers did not belong to the party he was determined to pursue.

"Dat giant oak must be somewhere near here, dad," he heard a voice say.

"Sure thing, Chuck, unless you are right, and that Biff fellow——"

"Buff, you mean."

"Well, that Carter fellow was after me and has stopped the whole business."

Press on. We're past the appointed time now, and we must find Vasa!"

"Why!" breathed Bob engrossedly—"one of them I know. It's Downey. The other called him 'dad.' He must be the son, Chuck, that Buff told us about. Well, they're too late. Am I to shadow Roxy and those four grim-looking fellows?"

Bob felt that affairs were at a sizzling point—they had suddenly become rapid and complicated enough to satisfy the most ardent taste.

He did not waste time calculating how the arrival of the Downeys had been brought about, or what they hoped to accomplish.

He centred every thought on Roxy, and what she was being led forward to face.

That involved a sharp, immediate shadow. Bob was an expert at this. He had lost sight of the people he wanted, but he soon struck a trail of fresh foot-prints in the dewy grass.

He came upon a low stone structure abruptly.

It resembled some square Mexican house rather than a modern habitation, and its jail-like appearance was sombre.

It had but one entrance door at the side, and this was closed. A lighted window beside it showed. Bob ran to it and peered in.

He saw two men crossing a room, dragging a heavy floor rug between them.

On the grass outside was a second rug, rolled up loosely.

Bob instantly discerned two points—the men he had seen were two of the party who had escorted Roxy.

The rugs, left out to air, they were just taking into the house.

"I'll risk it!" decided Bob, quickly, boldly, as he always did when confronted with a square issue and a bare moment in which to make a choice.

Bob burrowed into the rug.

The men came out and pulled it by its ends rather than lifted it.

Bob's back got a sharp knock against the door step.

Then he was flopped flat as the rug was hung into a corner.

He heard the door locked and chained

—the light in the room was extinguished.

The two men went into some other apartment, and the low hum of voices reached Bob as he crept out from his muffling covert.

Bob listened, but no intelligible word reached his ears. Then he pursued a brief groping investigation.

A door cautiously opened led him into a narrow corridor.

Light penetrated it dimly through a murky partition pane.

Bob glided toward this and looked into an illuminated room.

It was quite luxuriously furnished, and the walls were hung with queer charts covered with symbols and pictures.

"Looks like the den of an astrologer," commented Bob. "There's Roxy."

Nick Carter's girl detective sat in a chair, and beside and behind her stood the four men who had escorted her hither.

They were stiff as sentinels, and their eyes were fixed on a V-shaped screen likewise covered with curious symbols.

"I'd say some hocus-pocus was up, if it wasn't for this ten-thousand-dollar bill. That's very tangible, and it's genuine, too," soliloquized Bob.

Roxy's face wore an expectant, but by no means awed or frightened look.

Bob caught a muffled sound from behind the screen, and bent his ear sharply.

"The girl has come?" he heard uttered in strained, cracked accents.

"Yes," spoke one of the men near Roxy.

"Wheel me forward that I may see her."

The two men advanced.

One swept the screen aside, one got behind a strange, stuffed chair resembling some throne of state.

He pushed it forward.

As he did so, Roxy uttered a startled cry.

Bob nearly repeated it.

He had seen some queer things in his queer career, but he had never noted anything approaching this.

There was a man in the chair—

A man with his head in a glass case!

CHAPTER VIII.

SNAKES!

"It beats me!" gasped Bob Ferret, fairly electrified.

The more he stared the more he wondered.

He could not believe that there was any affectation or "show business" about the scene in view.

The four men were too serious and intelligent-looking to be triflers.

"The man's got his head in a glass case," soliloquized Bob, breathlessly—"what's the object?"

It was always the way with Nick Carter's pupils to pass by surface seeming for what might lurk beneath.

Bob tried to attach some utility to the glass mask, to find out what it was worn for.

It closely fitted a spare form arrayed in faded velvet garb here and there ornamented with tarnished tinsel.

It was so thick that just the suggestion of a real face was apparent beneath.

Where it fitted the shoulders two rubber tubes ran into two copper cylinders stored in a corner of the room.

From one near protruded a thin silver bowl—a similar one was appended from an orifice at the lips.

"Ear trumpet, speaking tube," reflected Bob—"still, why the glass mask?"

"Remove the mask," he heard spoken just then, and was all attention at once.

It was like uncovering a death's head. Even Roxy turned a little white about the lips.

The glass device was placed carefully on a table at the side of its wearer's chair.

The person's natural face was the color and texture of parchment—shriveled, misformed, utterly expressionless.

Only the eyes seemed alive. They flashed, burned, burrowed, pierced.

They were fixed upon the mark on Roxy's cheek—eagerly.

They scanned the queer chain and charm at her neck with intentness.

Then they scrutinized in a sweeping

glance the papers Bob had delivered up, now held for inspection by the man he had given them to:

"It is she," spoke the man resembling an animated mummy—"it is Elsie Deane. That is your name?"

Roxy sat erect like a person in a witness chair.

"They have called me that," she said simply.

"Do you know who I am?"

"How should I?"

"That is true—you do not even know who you are yourself."

Roxy looked very inquisitive.

"You are—a queen!"

Bob was shaken—this was lunatic-play—sheer!

"Queen of the Zangari—Alpo gypsies."

"That's news," murmured Roxy, bound to say something.

"I am your grandfather—I am the last of the royal family, except yourself."

Bob palpitated with suspense. What could all this be leading up to?

"Our glory is departed. These four faithful servants, soon doomed to wander, homeless, friendless, back to their native land—are all that is left in America of a once powerful tribe."

The old man spoke with sad, fervid emotion, and very earnestly.

"Your mother was my daughter. She died, and your father fearing we might claim you or lure you away, hid you in a school and became a wanderer," proceeded the old gypsy. "He died a year ago in Brussels. Since then we have tried to find you. Outsiders sought to trace you. We hired them to do so. This is the result. You are here, with your one living relative—myself—and you are a queen!"

Roxy looked impressed, but still curious.

"As such, I am going to deliver over to you the last poor heirlooms of our many treasures. To keep them from you would be violating the sacred precedent of our royal line—I am going to ask you to take me with you wherever you may go. It will not be for long."

It looked as if the man uttered the truth, for even now he gasped painfully when he spoke.

"For two years," he went on, "th

only way I could retain my frail hold on life has been to wear that glass head storing an artificial vital gas coming from those cylinders. I cannot talk long now without it. My friends, place the box on the table, and depart."

A small chest was lifted from a corner and placed in reach.

"Farewell!"

The old man bent his head upon his breast with the sorrowful word.

The four men, with averted eyes, bent to the ground before him, passed from the room into another, and Bob heard them unlock a door, go out of the house, and away.

The oracle was plain to read now—this man was about to enrich his supposed granddaughter and throw himself upon her care.

He unlocked the box on the table, Bob tiptoed, craned his neck to peer.

From it he lifted a flexible string of jewels, and never in his life had Bob seen such a radiant string of rubies, pearls, all manner of exquisitely cut gems.

"A tiara once worn proudly," murmured the old gypsy, and he placed it on Roxy's head. "It is yours."

"This," he said, and he drew out a large package, "is stored with banknotes. See, it is marked 'two hundred thousand dollars,' but I must explain about this and what I have behind yonder door in the vault as well. Here is the key——"

"What is the matter!" cried Roxy in real alarm, as the old man almost fell forward in his chair.

"My breath—I cannot catch it. The mask! the gas—doomed!"

Bob Ferret was fairly appalled, but he was not unnerved, and he ran unceremoniously into the room.

In reaching for his glass mask, to don it, to revive his strained faculties with a new supply of the vital gas, the old gypsy had done a fatal, a frightful thing.

His trembling hands had seized it only to drop it.

Crash!

It went to atoms on the floor at his feet.

Real need of the life-sustaining gas or the shock produced immediate consequences.

His eyes closed. As Bob ran forward, he fell into his arms.

"The tube—the gas may restore him!" cried Roxy.

"Too late," answered Bob, as the attenuated figure slipped rigid from his grasp.

"He is dead?"

"Yes."

"Bob, this is—awful!"

Roxy's face was white with the strain she had gone through, quivering with its culminating tragedy.

"I never heard, read, or dreamed of such an affair!" she went on.

"It is plain enough, though," answered Bob—"this man's longing for his half-gypsy grandchild was natural. He has left us a rich responsibility."

"These gems, that package, for the real Elsie Deane?" said Roxy.

"Yes. Take this." And Bob handed the package to Roxy. "It is marked 'two hundred thousand dollars.'"

"But there was something to explain about that, he claimed," suggested Roxy, "and that key he said fitted yonder door."

"We had better make a brief investigation."

Bob fitted the key to the door.

It was heavy, and had a spring lock, but no knob.

"Hold it open, Roxy," he said.

Stone steps led down somewhere—the air was dense.

Bob lit his dark lantern and pressed by Roxy.

"Bob!" she spoke sharply.

He ran back toward her, for he saw that something had startled her in the room they had just left.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Some one——"

Bob looked beyond Roxy.

It was only a glimpse he had but it was enough.

Entering the room at the opposite door were the persons he had passed near the giant oak—the Downes, father and son.

Roxy thrust the string of gems into her pocket.

She took a tighter clutch on the money package, for she instantly recognized the intruders.

The sweep of the draught gave the heavy door a jar.

Roxy, not knowing if Bob wished to spring out or remain hidden, made a false move by giving in with it.

There was a click and the sinking sound of a heavy catch.

"I'm afraid you've done it, Roxy!" spoke Bob, quickly.

"Maybe they didn't see us?"

"It isn't that. We're locked in—tightly."

"There must be a way out."

"We'd better find it, then. We carry entirely too much solid value to do any loitering. Come, this way."

The old gipsy had called the place they were in his vault.

It was, indeed, such, and it puzzled Bob to guess what it was used for.

He knew, as he turned the corner of a damp, reeking corridor.

A storm of hisses assailed him—a score of sparks of fire seemed to rise up magically in the air.

One gleam of his masked lantern revealed a dozen immense writhing bodies.

"Back, Roxy!—for your life!" he gasped.

"What is it, Bob?"

"Snakes!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERATE RESOURCE.

Bob Ferret was daunted, and his lip quivered as he set it resolutely as he could.

There was no denying the predicament of the moment—it was desperate, unique and extraordinary enough to be unnerving.

"Close quarters, Roxy!" he breathed, rapidly.

"Run!"

"Where to—they'll only follow. Get behind me."

"I won't!"

Bob pressed Roxy back of him—he began slowly retreating.

He saw how useless such tactics would prove, however, if he had to hold out long.

He had never seen before in one group so many, such active and such large reptiles of their class as those now advancing upon them.

"The old gipsy must have been a snake-charmer—lots of his kind are," reflected Bob. "He's just kept these serpents shut up here till they've become a community. Roxy, I want you to run back to the door."

"If I must leave you?"

"Get there quick."

"What to do?"

"Knock, pound, yell."

"Those fellows are in the room beyond?"

"It doesn't matter. We must get out before we're bitten—better a fighting chance for life than sure annihilation."

Bob kept his lantern focused on the writhing, rearing serpents.

The flare somewhat dazed them, but he could not take them all within its scope.

The result was that a shifting to the slightest shadow was the instant signal for the venomous dart of myriad lithe, rubbery coils.

Bob kicked out—then he got out his revolver.

He waited his chance, and he fired at an advancing head not a foot distant.

Bang! bang! two other fanged menaces went writhing to the floor.

Bob kept it up—panting, glaring desperately.

At the door Roxy was pounding, shouting.

"Help! Let us out! We are surrounded by snakes! The key is in the door."

There was no response.

"Bob!" she cried, faintly, "they are not in there."

"The Downeys?"

"No."

"They must be."

"Or they will not aid us."

"It's getting critical."

Bang!

It was Bob Ferret's last shot.

Roxy knew it—Roxy had counted.

"Here, Bob."

She had run back to her comrade in peril.

It was to press into his hand her own weapon—an exquisite little model, fine as polished steel and costly ivory could make it—a gift from Nick Carter himself.

Bob started in with a new fusillade.

There was something terrible in the voiceless destruction he wrought.

The hollow echoes of the vivid reports alone pierced the clammy stillness of the vault.

"It's little use," he muttered—"they are too many for us."

"Oh, Bob!" shrieked Roxy.

He had handed her the lantern when he took her weapon.

It almost fell from her hand as she saw him topple now.

Bob's foot had slipped on the reeking floor.

He took a slide, straight into the wrestling, writhing nest of motion.

In a frenzied way Roxy raised lantern and bundle to strike down the swaying heads darting up all about him. Then she noticed a long-necked, gourd-shaped bottle reposing on a small shelf.

Roxy seized it—the narrow neck afforded a good handle clutch.

She raised it to hurl it, and the motion struck the floor over her head.

A crash, a brittle crackle, a deluge followed, and Roxy staggered.

"Bob!" she cried, half-suffocated with the fumes of some dense fluid. "Bob!" she panted, blindly groping about.

Her eyes began to clear—some one staggered against her.

"Oh, Bob! it is you?"

"Surely."

"Safe—not bitten?"

"No, but the air is weakening, poisoned. That bottle——"

"I broke it."

"The snakes—look! It must be some chemical that the old gipsy used to subdue them."

It looked that way—comparatively inert, there was only a flat, slowly sinuous mass now where vital activity had been formerly manifested.

The chemical that had affected the serpents, however, threatened as well to overpower the two human refugees in the vault.

"Do something, Bob!" gasped Roxy.

"We can't force that door behind us."

"I'm afraid not."

"Let us find another one, then."

"Over—those?" shivered Roxy, shrinking from stepping over the floor littered with the snakes.

"Got to."

"Run quick, Bob. Ugh! It feels like death!"

They got clear of the mass. The lantern guided them along two windings in the fetid cellar.

"Here we are," announced Bob.

"It's time," murmured Roxy—"my head's splitting."

"Help me," directed Bob.

They had come to an opening in the stone wall filled in with boards.

Both massed their strength—there was a creak and the timbers toppled slowly outward.

"Air!" murmured Bob, with a fervent gasp, creeping out.

"Starlight!" voiced Roxy, following.

"And danger! Hide what you've got."

"No, fight for it!"

Both had seen two forms deploy from some near shrubbery as if to cover any attempt at an escaping rush.

"It's those fellows," spoke Roxy.

"The Downeys, yes," answered Bob.

"They've been waiting for us——"

"It looks so."

"Hey, you!"

Roxy had grabbed up a stick that lay at her feet and backed to the side of the house.

Bob clubbed his revolver.

Not six feet away was Downey the elder, and beyond him stood his son.

Both had pistols, and they held them ready for any emergency.

It was the father who had uttered the sharp challenge.

"Well, what do you want?" parleyed Bob. "Roxy!" he whispered in the same breath, "get away with the plunder."

"At all hazards?"

"Sure."

"That's my part?"

"Don't I say so!"

"We want what you've got, you thief!" roared old Downey.

"I'm no thief," answered Bob.

"You've cabbaged our fee."

"For stealing a girl?"

"You've got a lot of other stuff belonging to some one else."

"We'll give it to its rightful owner."

"No, you won't—you'll give it to me!"

Old Downey made a spring forward at Bob.

Whack!

Dauntless Roxy, gliding between the two, made a fearful cut with the stick in her hand.

It must have laid the ruffian's cheek bare to the bone, for he uttered a frightful yell.

"Done your share, leave them to me now—you cut for it!" ordered Bob.

Roxy sped away.

Bob stooped to grab up a stone.

Chuck Downey improved the opportunity.

He made a lunge and a kick, and Bob went over.

His father, snarling out his rage and pain, was about to spring upon Bob and wreck his spite fully.

"He's knocked out," piped Chuck. "Don't you see—he hasn't got de boodle."

"Hasn't?"

"No, de girl has."

"Where's she?"

"See her running?"

"Like a deer!"

"After her! I saw de package in her hand."

"Oh, we must get it!"

"You bet we'll get it!"

"I bet you won't!"

Bob voiced the dissent more stanch in spirit than in frame.

Chuck's big fist had missed him, but Chuck's big foot had come like a horse's hoof aside of his head.

Besides that, the dizzying effects of the chemical let loose in the vault still lingered.

Bob swayed as he ran all the same.

The moonlight was bright enough to guide him as to the movements of every living character taking part in a wild dash and a wilder pursuit.

Roxy had a good lead, but the Downeys were hot on her trail.

Bringing up the rear, Bob, unarmed, felt that he was at a decided disadvantage, but his presence might count if the determined ruffians succeeded in running Roxy down.

Bob did not fear this—for Roxy was quick as a flash—on a free field, but, traversing unfamiliar territory, she was already in trouble.

She had come to what Bob at a distance guessed to be a sheer cliff, cutting down to the river.

For a minute Roxy paused, glanced back, and she put north like a streak.

All kinds of threats pursued her, but she did not heed them.

Even a shot fired had no power to unsteady or dismay her.

The ground was rising, and with some uncertainty and anxiety Bob noticed that the ascending stretch seemed narrowing.

The Downeys never turned to notice him—they were ardent only on the rich prize they were resolved should not escape their clutches.

Suddenly Bob, twenty yards to the rear, caught a hilarious shout from the elder Downey's lips.

"She's good as caught!" he cried.

Roxy had come to where a railed platform spanned a narrow gully.

Beyond was a level plateau with a small frame building on it.

"Is dat so?" called back Chuck, in the lead.

"Sure."

"Why?"

"Rock stops short—that's the Star Signal Company's shed."

"What's dat?"

"And there are the new signal rockets they're introducing. Close in on her, for she can't escape us."

Roxy was hemmed in. She knew it, and had halted with fifty feet of nothingness facing her.

Bob saw it, too, and got ready for the struggle of his life.

He noticed the shed, and he understood from Downey's hurried words that the signals alluded to were some new marine fireworks.

He comprehended their magnitude as he observed one of them slanting against the shed.

It was an enormous rocket.

There was another one resting against a sort of framework where Roxy had halted.

"Now then, girl!" voiced Chuck's father, jubilantly.

"We've got yer!" cried Chuck himself.

"You haven't!" flared Roxy. "I'll

beat you, I'll disappoint you, if I jump over into the river!"

"You'll drown if you do."

"I don't care—I'll baffle you!"

"Dad, look at her."

Bob, running close on their heels, looked also.

Roxy seemed to be tying the package of banknotes around the rocket stick, or rather scantling, directly beside her.

The Downeys had about thirty feet to yet run ere they reached her.

Bob read Roxy's purpose somewhat marvelingly.

She was in desperate straits, and she seemed resolved to prevent her pursuers from securing the package of money at all hazards.

Snap—flare!

Roxy had lit a match.

"Shoot at her!" raved Chuck Downey—"don't you see she's going to send de stuff up wid de rocket!"

Flash—splutter!

Roxy could scarcely reach the enormous fuse of the enormous firework.

She had to tiptoe to apply the flame.

She had as well to reach around a sort of shield, which spread out like the protecting cover of an umbrella.

Hiss! went the fuse, sending out a miniature torrent of sparks.

Chuck Downey fired once—Bob imagined that Roxy uttered a slight cry.

Whizz-zz-zz!

The air fairly convulsed—there was a chugging concussion.

In a brilliant, lurid splotch of fire, the immense rocket shot from its resting base.

Something trailed at its end.

Bob Ferret stared.

Roxy, the dauntless, had gone up with the rocket!

CHAPTER X.

A RIDE ON A ROCKET.

Roxy had gone up with the rocket, but not far, and not on purpose.

She had seized what seemed to be a staple set in the side of the rocket stick to reach up over the protecting shield and ignite the fuse.

When it started, and Roxy sought to

draw back, she wriggled and wrestled wildly, for her hand was caught as in the springy clutch of an umbrella catch.

She was dragged perforce slantingly up, and her heart stood still.

Her weight seemed to impede the full cleaving force of the projectile.

Ten feet aloft the rocket chugged like a wheel-slipping locomotive.

Overweighted, it seemed about to career or drop, to expend its energy in sparks instead of motion, when Roxy broke loose.

Like a bird released, the mighty firework went aloft.

Still holding to the handle that had caught her, Roxy prepared for a fearful drop.

As it pulled loose from the rocket stick, however, Roxy saw its utility.

It was part and parcel of a folded parachute let into a slot in the stick.

This opened. As on an air-resisting cushion, Roxy went sailing down instead of hurtling down.

An experimental firework, so fixed that it could be shot over a ship in distress, and exploding could drop a parachute containing cable, provisions, a message, Roxy had accidentally liberated a device that prevented a crashing fall, or a wild spin through space that would probably have ended her acrobatic career.

With fallen jaws the spark-dazzled elder Downey watched the liberated projectile go cleaving the ether a thousand feet up like a fiery whirlwind.

Chuck glared, things happening so quickly that he could not take them all in with coherency.

As the rocket took its spurt, however, he uttered a vivid yell.

"Dad!"

"What?"

"De package de girl tied to dat stick!"

"Where?"

"See it—dropping."

Both looked, and Bob looked, too.

Secured with a frail string, or that string jerked free as Roxy's parachute attachment broke loose, sailing down now was an unmistakably familiar object.

It was the package which Roxy had decided to trust rather to the eccentricities of a wild firework than the grappling-

hook covetousness of the Downeys, father and son.

What had become of Roxy, none of the terrifically excited trio now left on the scene of action could discern.

She had dropped below range of the cliff level.

Bob had no opportunity to see past it, and the Downeys were engrossed only in watching the destination of the old gipsy's package marked "two hundred thousand dollars."

It had fallen from the ascending rocket stick much farther out from the cliff than had Roxy and the parachute.

"Dere!" piped Chuck, boiling over with excitement.

"I see it—landed!" cried his father.

"On de oder side of de river."

"Get there!"

"Follow me!"

Bob saw what the two plotters saw—Bob was in action as quickly as they.

It was now simply a question of getting down to the river shore and swimming the stream.

"First come first served!" muttered Bob, doughtily. "But—Roxy! My brain's on fire with worry and wonder about her."

Had she made a landing in safety—Bob did not know, He could only hope.

He instantly set at work to scan the surest prospects for getting below.

At any point nearer than the platform-crossed gully, anything but a sheer fatal drop seemed an impossibility.

Here there was some slant to the ravine side.

Bob ran back swiftly toward this.

Twenty feet accomplished, for the first moment the Downeys discovered his proximity.

"Dere's de oder one!" shouted Chuck.

"Sure it is!" bawled his father.

"He's seen it."

"Seen what?"

"He's after it!"

"After what?"

"De boodle, and dere he goes—diving!"

It was not a dive—it was a drop, a fall, a tumble.

A precipitated, erratic progress, and it was anything to reach the river shore below with Bob Ferret now!

Shaken up and bruised, he staggered over rocks and dead brush choking up the opening of the gully.

Bob's first glance was down the shore.

His heart sank—no Roxy.

He shifted his vision across stream.

Lying in plain view on the opposite shore where it had fallen, was the paper package.

Bob looked back, as one sliding rustle and crackling plunge among dead branches was followed by a second.

"We're hot after him!" panted Chuck's tones.

"Waiow! I'm ripped all up the back!" howled his precious sire.

"Get your gun in action—I'll attend to him."

"He's plunged in!"

Splash!

Bob took to the water without further delay.

He kept his eye on the package—the prize at the winning pole.

He struck out like the expert swimmer that he was, and redoubled his exertions as there was an echo to his splashing progress.

A backward glance showed Chuck puffing in his wake, but making a swift record, a natural water rat.

Bob got to shore not six feet in advance of him.

He made his dripping feet fairly fly toward the package.

As he neared it he stooped and shot a calculating look back between his outspread limbs.

Bob seized the package.

It was the one the old gypsy had taken from his strong chest.

The faded but heavy tracing looked up into his face—"two hundred thousand dollars."

"A big stake to play for," ran through his thoughts—"he's got a revolver!"

Grab!

Bob performed half a dozen clever gymnastic evolutions in as many seconds.

His grab was a double one—with one set of fingers he clutched the package, with another a round, heavy flat stone.

He arose erect, but through a sideways slant, and he whirled on one heel as on a pivot.

His boulder-equipped arm went up and came down timed to a second.

Smash!

It was his only weapon, that flat, round missile, and Bob used it for all that it was worth.

It came down on the astonished and unprepared Chuck Downey's head, stopping his headlong course like a stone wall.

He went flat, doubling up, struck on his face and lay perfectly motionless.

Chuck had drawn his revolver the minute he emerged from the water.

Bob had caught its gleam as he looked back when stooping.

As Chuck was knocked prostrate, the weapon was hurled from his hand in among the bushes lining the shore.

Bob tucked the package of money in the breast of his coat.

Then he looked across the river.

To his surprise the elder Downey was nowhere in sight.

Bob fancied he saw him vaguely moving about though some bushes back of the shore, but he was not certain.

Chuck seemed laid out helpless. Bob started a search for the pistol.

He was still searching, when an angry, fervent yell reached his ears.

"You—varmint!"

Downey, shaking one fist clinched, the other waving his revolver, was madly shouting across the river.

Bob ventured to appear in view, but ready for a dive back to safe shelter at any indication of target practice.

"Meaning me?" he sang out.

"Oh, you—you—detective!"

That word encompassed all the scorn and obloquy it was possible for Downey to express.

"Don't like detectives, do you?" railed Bob.

"Oh! you're funny, ain't you? You've killed my boy!"

"Maybe—he deserved it."

"You've got that property of ours."

"It's mine, now."

Bob was willing to waste time "chinning," for he kept scanning the shore in hopes of discovering some trace of Roxy.

Downey kept prancing about in frantic rage and chagrin.

The sight of his vigorous young son and ally laid out helpless, a realization of the fact that Bob had secured the coveted money package, consumed him with the most violent desperation.

"You give that up!" he bellowed—do you hear? instantly!"

"You keep that pistol of yours straight up or straight down," directed Bob, "or you can't talk with me."

To Bob's intense amazement, Downey flung the pistol twenty feet away from him.

"I don't need a pistol to deal with you!" he hissed. "You haven't killed him!" he shouted, as Chuck moved and struggled to a confused sitting posture. "Well for you! Well for you! Now, then, you stand there, you wait a minute."

"Will I? What for?"

"Till I show you something that will dazzle your eyes."

Bob was very much puzzled.

The abandoned revolver indicated strong confidence in some powerful reserve influence of bringing him to time.

Downey's last words, threatening yet half exultant, were enigmatically ominous.

"You sit still, do you hear?" observed Bob, as Chuck shifted his position and glanced bewilderedly at him.

The young rowdy put his hand to his head with a wry grimace as if he was too rattled and battered to do much of anything else.

Bob provided himself with a thick stick to be prepared if Chuck should attempt to disobey him.

Then he fixed his eyes on the opposite shore.

Out from the bushes into which he had just dived so animatedly, into view came the elder Downey again.

He was not alone, and he staggered under a human burden.

Across his shoulder he carried an inert form.

With it he came to a halt at the river brink, dropped his burden to the sand, propped it against his knee:

He forced up and threw back a white, set face.

"Roxy!" gasped Bob with a thrill.

"How's that?" came a sharp, vicious hail from Downey's lips.

There was malice, vengefulness, murderous intonation in the mocking accents.

Bob could only theorize that Roxy's parachute descent had ended in a fall.

Downey had discovered her, and the turn affairs had taken, disastrous to his expectations, had suggested a way to play Bob a Roland for his Oliver.

Bob had Chuck for a hostage—Chuck's father was able to give tit-for-tat.

"Do you hear me? how's that!" again snapped out the crime-hardened old ruffian.

Bob tried to pull himself together to some semblance of his usual nerviness.

"Oh, it's a girl?" he spoke with affected lightness.

"A girl, is she?" ha-ha'd the villain—"yes, and just as much Elsie Deane as you are a Jew peddler. She's Nick Carter's girl detective, and you are Nick Carter's boy detective, I reckon we'll soon come to terms now, my young and festive friend!"

"Well?"

"Or I'll make you squirm."

Bob was silent.

"Hear me!" shouted Downey.

"Go ahead."

"Hear me, quick! act quick! No trifling, not a second, or you'll see the sight of your life. Chuck, get up. I've got work for you."

Bob did not demur as Chuck struggled to an erect position.

He saw that a curdling climax impended, and tried to surmise what would be the limit of its possibilities.

"Now then, you," called out Downey to Bob, blatant and blustering, "hand over that package of money to my son."

"Suppose I don't?"

"Eh! what! Suppose you don't?" fairly roared Downey.

"Yes, suppose I don't?"

"I'll show you!"

From his bosom the burly old ruffian whipped out a bright-bladed knife in a flash.

"Sharp as a razor," he blared. "Look!"

He made a clip at a weed stalk.

Bob's nerves crept as it took off the

stout wiry head of the plant as if passing through putty.

"Look again!"

Downey set the edge of the knife straight down across the white throat of Nick Carter's unconscious girl detective.

"Sure as living, quick as lightning," hissed Downey—"speak smart, act brisk—ten seconds—give up that two hundred thousand dollars, or—I'll cut this girl's throat before your very eyes!"

CHAPTER XI.

"N. G."

Bob Ferret felt paralyzed.

"One—two—three—four—five!"

Downey was counting the vital seconds away.

"He'll do it—give in!" whispered Chuck in an intense tone.

Bob's head was whirling.

It was not a question of saving Roxy's life—that was too precious to consider, were the wealth of a kingdom in the balance.

It was the thought of being baffled, beaten, forced for the first time in his brilliant detective career, to compromise with criminals at the end of a well-fought, hard won case.

"Six—seven—eight—nine—ten!"

"I'll do it!"

Bob shot out the words in a shrill, hurried call.

He was just in time—a vicious, certain glide of the knife across Roxy's snowy throat was barely hindered.

"Pass that money package over to my son!"

Bob obeyed.

"Chuck, swim over here."

Chuck stowed the package in his clothing and crossed the stream.

"I'm a man of my word," spoke Downey, dropping Roxy, unharmed to the ground. "You've blocked us, made us trouble. You'd be safer out of the way, but—I guess we've got you downed."

"Dad! it's marked two hundred thousand dollars!" jubilated Chuck.

The twain hurried down the shore. They turned out of view.

Bobs lips were set in a mask of grimness.

"They've got me! he muttered, "but—not so safe, my friends, maybe, as you think!"

Bob swam over and forgot all about them momentarily in his solicitude for the brave, reliable little helper who lay white and still on the shining sand.

He soon saw that Roxy was not in a serious condition.

He set at work to revive her—carrying water from the river to drench her face, holding to her lips a vial containing a volatile solution he always carried for just such exigencies.

Time was precious—half an hour had brought no results except a faint fluttering of the lips, but Bob felt that his duty was at Roxy's side.

Finally her eyes opened. It only needed for Roxy to guess that she had been idle when activity counted most, to instantly spur up every energy.

"Bob!" she fluttered, trying to rally her memory.

"You fainted, Roxy."

"I never faint!"

"Don't you?"

"I was stunned—a slip from the parachute as it struck a tree. Bob, those men?"

"You are hurt——"

"Never mind me!"

"But——"

"Do you hear me!" and Roxy actually stamped her foot with impatience.

"Those men, I say?"

"Got away."

"And the money package?"

"With them."

"You never let them get it, Bob Ferret!"

"Roxy, I had to."

As Bob narrated his recent experience, Nick Carter's girl detective tried to look as if his compromise had been a violation of the most sacred ethics of detective science, but her heart warmed at his sterling devotion.

"Lost time, Bob," she commented tersely. "Make up for it."

"Come on."

"Those fellows have gone somewhere—the old gypsy's house, the giant oak, the Punch and Judy wagon."

In turn the two young detectives visited these three points.

As they neared the spot where Vasa had indulged in Bob's "loaded" cigar, Roxy halted his leading progress by grasping his arm.

"I see them," she said, simply.

"Yes, there they are."

"And Vasa too."

"They've roused him up."

"I thought the drugged cigar would keep him quiet till midnight?"

"It would, if he was left quiet—just as you'd be dreaming now, Roxy, if I hadn't worked over you."

"Bob, what are we going to do?" inquired Roxy, peering anxiously.

"I guess we can't do much of anything," responded Bob. "Those men are armed, we are not. They are getting ready for a break. Listen, watch—something may turn up to favor us."

Upon a tree stump stood a lantern. About it grouped the two Downeys and Vasa.

The latter looked like a man suddenly aroused from sleep, but he was listening intently to Chuck Downey, who was speaking.

"Dere it is," said the young bully, producing the package from the old gypsy's strong box—"see? marked 'two hundred thousand dollars.'"

"It is—it's a rich haul!" gloated Vasa. "We'll divide."

"I guess so! seeing dat but for me you wouldn't get a wink at it," vaunted Chuck. "We'll divide, and den I advise you to put. Nick Carter's trusties may stop to rest a bit, but never quit a trail entire. It's thirds. See?"

"Yes! yes!" palpitated the eager Vasa.

"Here we are!"

Chuck broke the stout cord encircling the package.

Upon the tree stump fell as many as twenty parcels, neatly done up in paper likewise.

"'Ten thousand'—'twenty thousand'—one thousand'—'two thousand'," read Chuck, scanning the various indorsements.

He juggled the packages rapidly, tossing them into three heaps.

"Dat's near enough," he said. "I'll

take dis odd-t'ousand fer me extra ducking."

Each one grabbed up his portion like a hungry dog seizing a bone.

Vasa opened the end of one of the packages.

"Say!" he began.

He hurriedly tore off the covering entire. Then he uttered a yell.

"What's got you?" queried Chuck.

"If they're all like this!"—panted Vasa, and tore open a second package.

"Fooled!" he screamed, ripping a third—"duped! cheated!"

"Why! what's he raving about?" demanded the elder Downey, wonderingly.

"N. G.!" groaned Vasa, dropping, kicking, spurning the packages madly.

"Those bills——"

"Money, ain't dey?" piped Chuck.

"Yes."

"Den——"

"Confederate money!"

"What's dat?"

"Never!"

Bob Ferret gave a start—Roxy peered with all her eyes.

A wild scene ensued. The two Downeys grew white to the lips as they verified Vasa's extraordinary statement.

They tore open the parcels like wolves rending a food pack.

The ground was littered with banknotes thicker than with the fallen leaves—one about as valuable as the other.

Then they looked hopelessly, desperately, angrily into one another's eyes.

And then they began to quarrel.

"You chumps! you dolts! You marplots!" cried Vasa in uncontrollable fury.

"Hold hard, there!" warned Downey.

"I won't! You've spoiled all. You've let the ten thousand dollar fee slip through our fingers—that we earned."

"Never thought of it," muttered Chuck.

"There were precious stones——"

"I saw them," murmured Downey, "but who'd think of such trifles with nigh on to a quarter of a million in real cash staring you in the face?"

"In waste paper!"

"We couldn't guess that."

"Somebody's got the ten thousand—the jewels!" cried Vasa.

"Yes, those two—Carter's young sleuthhounds."

"Where are they?"

"Dat's so!" cried Chuck, with a sprout of animation. "We know. Is it after dem, dad?"

"Is it—for your life!" shouted Vasa.

The three fellows dashed away like eager phantoms.

Bob waited till they were past sight and hearing, and ran over to where the four horses were tethered.

He untied two of them.

"You can ride, Roxy?" he said.

"You saw me at the beginning of the affair," smiled the flower girl.

"We'll end the case with a horseback dash also," observed Bob.

"For where?"

"Safety for those gems. You've got them?"

"Yes."

"And I the ten-thousand-dollar bill! The orphan seminary girl won't fare badly, after all."

"If the two hundred thousand dollars did turn out worthless Confederate money," murmured Roxy.

"The old gypsy must have accumulated that years ago," suggested Bob.

"He tried to explain. It's a scorcher for those three fellows!"

Early the next morning, Vasa, discontented, glum-faced, hunting for his two missing horses, found them at the stable of the nearest town.

As he stood inquiring of the host how they came there, a prompt figure stepped into view.

"I brought them," spoke Bob Ferret.

He was no longer the talkative Jew peddler, but Vasa recognized him with frightful scowl.

"I've sent your 'daughter' to Nick Carter with those jewels and that ten thousand dollars," continued Bob.

"I earned that money!" growled Vasa.

"And forfeited it by scheming to steal the rest of the plunder in sight," put Bob quickly. "Just present your claim to Mr. Carter, if you think it's a valid one," advised Bob.

Vasa's reply was a shiver.

"I ain't worrying for the penitence."

tiary!" he muttered. "Drat it all!—I've made a pickle of what was a square spec. Next time, I won't operate where there's any Nick Carter, or any Nick Carter detective school!"

Vasa made quick tracks out of the district, it seemed, and the Downeys, father and son, vanished quite as completely, for Bob did not run across a trace of them the rest of that day.

He had to remain until late in the afternoon arranging for the disposal of the trunks and furnishings at the old gypsy's recent home.

Its late occupant Bob saw decently buried, and he felt, as he locked the door of the old hermitage, as if he was turning the key on one of the most mysterious haunts he had ever penetrated.

When Bob reached Nick Carter's home that evening, he found that the veteran detective had smoothed out all the straggling ends of the case with his usual promptness.

Elsie Deane had been returned to the only home she knew—the New Haven girl's seminary from where she had been decoyed.

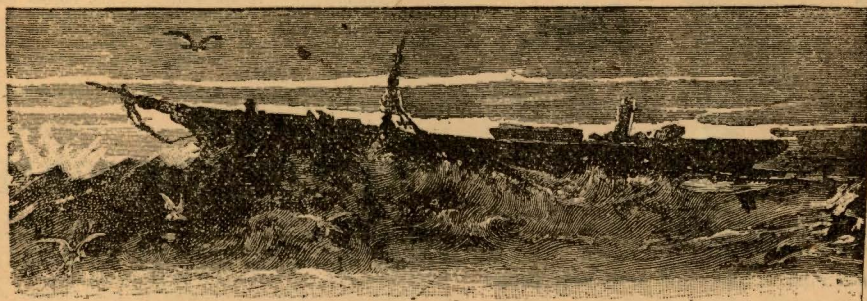
Roxy was bubbling over with satisfaction as Bob met her.

"When I think of how happy that girl has been made—how many unknown perils we may have helped her escape," exclaimed the clever little novice, "I'm dreadfully glad there's such a thing as Nick Carter's detective school!"

"That's right," nodded Bob, "but what would the school be without Nick Carter's girl detective!"

[THE END.]

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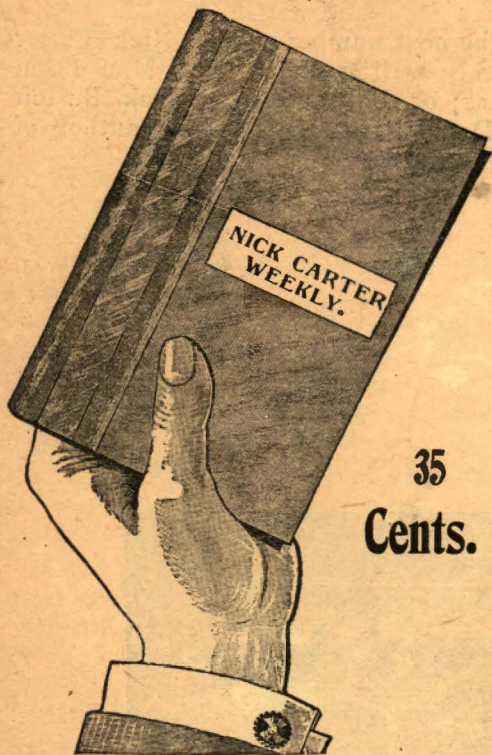
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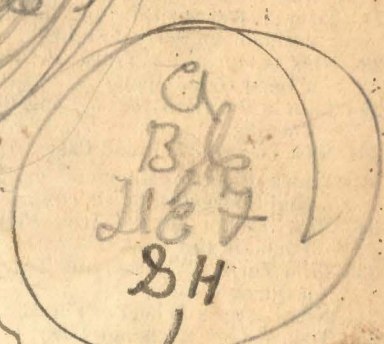
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